

Wages

UNITED STATES SECTION,
JOINT UNITED STATES-MEXICO
TRADE UNION COMMITTEE

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UNITED STATES SECTION, JOINT UNITED STATES-MEXICO TRADE UNION COMMITTEE
ASKS SECRETARY OF LABOR MITCHELL TO RECONSIDER HIS STAND AGAINST MINIMUM
WAGE COVERAGE FOR AGRICULTURAL LABOR

Washington -- Declaring that "the extent of wage and other exploitation that has been uncovered in connection with the Mexican Contract Labor Program" make it "especially evident" that agricultural workers need such protection, the United States Section of the Joint United States-Mexico Trade Union Committee has called on Secretary of Labor James P. Mitchell to "reconsider" his decision not to recommend that farm labor be covered by a federal minimum wage.

In a letter written with the unanimous approval of the committee, Chairman Frank L. Noakes told Mitchell that our nation's neglect of the welfare of "the men, women and children who toil at substandard wages and virtually without legal protection on the world's richest farms is one of the worst blots upon the American character in the eyes of millions" abroad.

"The indifference of our government to the welfare of agricultural workers is almost impossible to explain to our Mexican friends," Noakes wrote. He pointed out that the Mexican Government "has long had a minimum wage and other protection for Mexican farm workers in their own land" and that, "to its credit," the Mexican Government had "flatly refused to allow Mexican workers to come to work in this country for less than 50¢ hourly." That minimum, he noted, was set at the outset of the program and is now "outdated, and the labor movements of both nations believe that it should be revised upward to conform to the new \$1 minimum wage law."

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Noakes reminded Mithcell that Mexican contract workers coming to this country enjoy, by right of law, "many advantages and privileges denied to our own United States citizen farm workers, whom they often displace." He listed in addition to "a guarantee of a flat minimum wage of at least 50¢ an hour in the worst areas and of the 'prevailing wage' in others," provisions for free meals and transportation, health insurance, safe transportation, decent housing standards and guarantees of minimum hours of work.

"Not only are all of these provisions of law denied to our United States citizen workers, but we know for a fact that in some areas today Mexicans are receiving the minimum of 50¢ an hour, while some of our own domestic farm hands are being forced by poverty to accept jobs for an hourly wage of as little as 25¢," Noakes said.

He continued: "In contrast to the concern shown by the Government of Mexico for its workers' welfare, our government has been indifferent even about keeping its solemn pledges to protect their interests. Despite the fact that both the International Agreement with Mexico and the individual work contract signed by all employers of Mexican workers with each bracero spell out minimum guarantees of fair treatment, our committee and your own department's investigators have found so many violations that the Labor Department's compliance staff has been admitted to be inadequate to handle the load...

"With such violations going on under a program that contains legal safeguards for the workers, how much more exploitation is heaped upon our own citizen farm workers, who have none of the Mexican contract workers' legal rights and no enforcement officers whatever looking out for their interests, however haphazardly!"

Noakes said that all segments of society who are seeking to promote the welfare of United States farm workers have come to believe that it is this very group, "which today is denied the protection of minimum wage and most other social welfare legislation, that is most in need of this kind of protection."

He pointed out that relatively few large farms produce one-fourth of the farm products sold and employ the bulk of agricultural labor.

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"These highly mechanized corporate farms have increased productivity to a truly amazing degree and they can easily afford to pay the \$1 minimum that is in effect for most factory workers," he said. "Some, even today, do pay wages higher than the Fair Labor Standards Act minimum... This fact, we believe, is proof that extension of minimum wage protection to workers on large farms is both practicable and equitable. Actually, the family-type farmer, whose income depends in part upon his own labor, would be better able to meet the competition of the large-scale farm enterprises if the latter had to pay their employees decent wages."

In asking Mitchell to reconsider his decision not to recommend an extension of coverage of the Fair Labor Standards Act to agricultural labor, Noakes called such action "an essential first step toward meeting our nation's moral, social and economic obligations to the men, women and children whose blood, sweat and tears go into the harvesting of our agricultural abundance."

The Joint United States-Mexico Trade Union Committee is an official committee of the Inter-American Regional Organization of Workers (ORIT), which is affiliated with the International Confederation of Free Trade Unions. The Mexican Section is composed of organizations representing approximately 95 percent of organized labor in Mexico. The United States Section represents the American Federation of Labor and Congress of Industrial Organizations, the United Mine Workers of America and the Railway Brotherhoods affiliated with the Railway Labor Executives Association.